

East Cork's Quiet Revolution: The Role of Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland's Changing Foodscape

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Allied to the theme of the symposium, this paper sets out to establish how, with Darina Allen at its helm, Ballymaloe Cookery School in East Cork, Ireland has revolutionised Irish food culture over the past three decades. Ballymaloe Cookery School has been under scrutiny from many quarters, but the business and its impact have not been the subject of academic study to date. Invoking a qualitative approach, using findings and analysis from twenty semi-structured interviews, this paper investigates Ballymaloe Cookery School since its inception to the present. Employing a phenomenological approach and using grounded theory to analyse the primary data, the results of this study represent new and significant contributions to knowledge. The objective of this paper is to consider the school's achievements and understand how the business emerged, what values underpin its operations, and how it has evolved. This study further seeks to situate Ballymaloe Cookery School within a wider context of Irish food culture, and highlight the impact the cookery school has had on revolutionising Irish food.

Myrtle Allen, married to farmer Ivan Allen established Ballymaloe Country House in 1964. Myrtle Allen famously promoted the use of fresh locally produced and seasonal produce at a time when doing so was uncommon. At that time, classical French cuisine was *de rigueur* and menus were far from simple and rarely changed. Myrtle Allen first taught cookery classes at Ballymaloe in 1968. When she began running a restaurant in Paris, the teaching was largely taken over by her daughter-in-law, Darina Allen. Ballymaloe Cookery School was officially founded by brother and sister, Darina Allen (nee O'Connell) and Rory O'Connell in Shanagarry, Co. Cork in 1983. The findings reveal that Ballymaloe Cookery School is an example of on-farm diversification that was necessary for the viability of the farm household at a time when deriving income from horticultural production in Ireland had become increasingly challenging. For Darina Allen, establishing a cookery school seemed the obvious remedy. When interviewed she stated: 'I had no business model. I've never done market research. I didn't even know the word market research or feasibility study before I started.'

The evidence suggests that the business was established with an experimental approach. Early on, when establishing Ballymaloe Cookery School, Darina Allen carried out extensive research and development by way of travel to other private cookery schools overseas. She has stated: 'I went to them all. And to tell you the truth, I didn't change my ideas about what I wanted after seeing them all, if anything, my ideas became even more fixed' (Cited in Purcell 1989, p. 25).

Ballymaloe Cookery School focuses on product differentiation, rather than market share. There was no significant need for product differentiation at that time because private cookery schools in Ireland were largely unheard of. The school is widely considered part of a consolidation of small enterprises under the 'Ballymaloe' banner. The pre-existing ethos of Ballymaloe House and support from family lent a foundation to the cookery school. As understood by this respondent, a food writer: 'It's not just the cookery school, but Ballymaloe itself is such a brand.'

At Ballymaloe, generations of one family have direct involvement in the enterprises. The family dimension is considered intrinsic to their operation. All twenty study participants articulated the synonymy of the Allen family and the school and the bearing it has on the atmosphere and operation of the business, for employees and students alike. As illustrated by one local interviewee: 'It's very personal. It's a family run business and it shows that family run businesses can work.'

This reflects the 'family capital' that Hoffman *et al.* (2006) accord to family businesses. This form of social capital refers to a network of relationships that enables members of that network to access resources unavailable to those outside of it. With reference to the importance of shared values across the 'Ballymaloe' enterprises, Darina Allen states: 'Everybody operates to the same philosophy, to the same standard. It's not written down. It's just innate in us. It is part of what we are.'

Set amongst a rural landscape, close to the sea and surrounded by farms, Ballymaloe Cookery School is also well served by its 100 acre organic farm, gardens, and greenhouses, complete with cattle, pigs, ducks, chickens, and a small herd of jersey cows. This site has been crucial to the emergence of the school. Speaking at *The Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery* in 1987, Myrtle Allen declared that in her opinion, the flavour of a cooked dish depends on the following factors:

- The food and climatic conditions the animal, fish or vegetable has been raised on.
- The strain or variety of the produce.
- The conditions under which the food is kept before and after cooking.
- The length of time between gathering or killing, cooking and service.
- Sympathetic and careful cooking.
- Artistic and psychological conditions at table.
- Ingrained traditional prejudice. (Allen 1987, p. 17).

In this synthesis, Myrtle Allen acknowledges the complex nature of food and its production, in addition to the

importance of taste. The successful Ballymaloe House was built on these principles. The cookery school shares this philosophy. Every dimension of food is given consideration. The ethos of Ballymaloe Cookery School is holistic as it incorporates an emphasis on sustainability, and high quality ingredients that are fresh, local and seasonal. Sustainability concerns the environment, but also an ethos of caring for the land, the self and others. The organic site at Ballymaloe Cookery School facilitates the maintenance of its ethos. Ballymaloe Cookery School began a conversion towards organic certification in 1996. In 1983, when the school first opened, importance was not widely placed on such values with respect to food, which demonstrates the revolutionary nature of this ethos. Nowadays, there is a growing appreciation of such ideals. Inwood *et al.* (2009) acknowledge the potential of chefs to play a central role in the promotion of organic foods. Barber (2014) claims that chefs have been influential in strengthening the farm-to-table food movement because the taste of food is inextricably bound up in its production. Cork food writer Joe McNamee points out that Myrtle and Darina Allen championed such issues at a time when doing so was truly alternative, rare in fact. For McNamee (2014, p. 6): 'That ethos is the cornerstone of a great, global food movement.'

It has been widely acknowledged that Ballymaloe Cookery School is in large part to thank for Ireland's culinary reawakening in recent decades (Kit 1996). Ballymaloe Cookery School capitalises on its environmental, social and cultural distinctiveness. Associated with this is knowledge and understanding of good ingredients. For example, before the current trend in using foraged foods, herbs, seaweeds and fermented foods, these ingredients and methods were taught at the cookery school. As described by Darina Allen (1995, p. 7):

In Myrtle Allen I found a cook who believed in following the seasons, growing her own herbs – at a time when it was far from fashionable – and using the bounty of her farm and the Cork countryside to the full. She wrote her menus every day, according to what was best in the garden, and what came in from the fishing boats in Ballycotton.

This is central to the defining ethos of Ballymaloe and sets it apart from sites of culinary learning elsewhere. According to one study respondent who is a food blogger: 'I don't think that many cookery schools in the world, if any, have their own organic farm on site and onsite accommodation. It's about cooking but also about the whole ethos behind the food.'

This respondent highlights aspects of Ballymaloe Cookery School unique not only in Ireland, but the world. The term foodscape can be considered a consolidation of the terms food and landscape, emphasising the interconnectedness of the two (Yasmeen 2008). A historical account of Irish food describes the traditional Irish diet as 'simple food' (Sexton 1998). Darina Allen

(2015) argues that the common perception of Irish food as consisting of little besides bacon and cabbage fails to reflect the current state of food and cooking in Ireland. Food systems in Ireland have undergone major changes, particularly since mechanisation and intensification of agriculture began in the late nineteenth century (D'Arcy 2010). Much domestic labour has moved to industrial settings and thus diets, eating and meals have changed, alongside the rise of convenience foods (Pratt 2007). Debate about the decline of domestic cooking and cooking skills has intensified in recent years. Some have argued that people have become deskilled as a result of the pervasiveness of industrially produced convenience foods (Mintz 1985 and 1996; Ritzer 1996). As concern regarding the decline of home cooking skills across Western countries now grows (Pollan 2013), enrolment in cookery programmes has also increased (Fabricant 2003). At the official opening of Ballymaloe Cookery School in 1983 Myrtle Allen asserted: 'I would like to suggest that the greatest enemy a gourmet has in the 1980s and onwards is the type of shelf life that most foods are now expected to have. That results in some of the emphasis being taken off freshness. That is a great loss.'

This statement shows that over thirty years ago, changes in the food system was at the forefront of what the cookery school set out to draw attention to. Darina Allen's 2009 cookbook, *The Forgotten Skills of Cooking: The time-honoured ways are the best*, presents recipes and information about traditional culinary processes. She regards the acquisition of cooking skills as an essential life skill for everyone. This concern relates to the wider industrialisation of food. Ethical concerns regarding food remain overlooked in culinary education and practice, and as highlighted by Shani *et al.* (2013), culinary professionals have not typically been looked to as makers of change in this regard. Unlike what was traditionally the norm, many chefs and food celebrities today have a role that is outside the boundaries of the kitchen (Johnston *et al.* 2014). Increasingly, chefs are deemed to possess agency to make change as activists and leaders of 'food movements', much as Handler (1995, p. 134) describes USA chef, restaurateur and writer Alice Waters as: *a revolutionary*. Darina Allen has been likened to Waters *Chez Panisse* restaurant in Berkeley, California (e.g. Duram and Cawley 2012). A widespread desire for a reconnection with food, as observed by study participants, correlates with the development of a wider food movement of which Myrtle and Darina Allen are identifiable leaders. Darina Allen (2015) attributes the start of a recent renaissance in Irish food to a great extent, to the work of her mother-in-law Myrtle Allen during the 1960s.

Interest in culinary history and gastronomy has grown over the past thirty years (Messer *et al.* 2000). Such academic interest in food reflects growing interest in, and concerns about, food generally. The available literature evidences a recent rise internationally in enrolments on professional cookery programmes (Fabricant 2003; Mandabach *et al.*

2001). Increased demand for skilled professionals in the expanding food sector has driven such growth. Kramer (2007) argues that support for vocational learning and a changing view of professional cookery continue to contribute to the growing success of cooking schools worldwide. A broad range of institutions concerned with educating people on the art and science of cooking now exist worldwide. Some focus on educating those seeking a career in food, while others cater for hobbyists or fall somewhere in between. In Ireland, though private cookery schools attract many students, for the majority, formal culinary education is obtained at the Institutes of Technology (McGuire 2015). Internationally, a shift towards the integration of liberal components in culinary education curricula has been observed (Shani *et al.* 2013; Muller *et al.* 2009).

Study respondents consistently referred to a yearning among people they encounter, to reconnect with food, and learn about how food is produced and understood. For example, this respondent who works at Ballymaloe Cookery School spoke of what she notices: 'People are craving the simple things at the end of the day. A chocolate cake would be nothing, compared to that homemade butter.'

Such sentiments reflect a recent shift in favour of foodstuffs that had been shunned, in lieu of commercial products first introduced and widely embraced in Ireland during the 1970s. Darina Allen recalls their introduction not long ago, and expresses concerns regarding the adoption of such food practices:

I can remember distinctly the day the first packets of Instant Whip and Blancmange came to our village, and we couldn't wait to try them. These foods had a glamour and a novelty value which made home cooking seem dull by comparison. All over Ireland, within just a few years, people began to prize fancy shop-bought things...With the rush to embrace a new consumer culture of packet and tinned foods in the name of progress, a whole food tradition became jeopardised in an alarmingly short space of time (Allen 1995, p.5).

In contrast to the widespread acceptance of such industrial food products during that time, a more recent yearning for traditional foods made through traditional processes was observed by eleven study participants. A current teacher at the cookery school observes the present appetite for practical skills: 'I've noticed that nowadays, students want to learn. They want to go and milk the cows. They want to make butter. They want to make their own cheese.'

This evidences a desire among students to engage with all aspects of what is commonly dubbed 'from farm to fork', and a willingness among prospective chefs and cooks to step outside the kitchen. Michael Ruhlman in Severson (2015) states: 'People are coming to realise it is not about the recipe...They want to know how to think about food.'

This statement is crucial to understanding why people are drawn to Ballymaloe Cookery School. Techniques in

cooking can be learned in many sites and situations, but a wider comprehension of the food system, where food comes from and what this means, is frequently absent from such contexts. Banks (1968) emphasises the power of education not only to transmit skills, but also values. This is part of Myrtle and Darina Allen's mission. They have long told the *story* of food, with the purpose of reinforcing the connection between the people and places involved in food production, and those who use and eat the produce. Food blogger and former student at the school, Ketty Elisabeth (a.k.a. French Foodie in Dublin 2015) tells: 'It's more than a cookery school; it's a lifestyle and a philosophy.'

In a similar vein, many of those interviewed for the purposes of the research, drew attention to the broad range of topics and skills that the twelve week 'Ballymaloe course' offers. One respondent, who works in the food sector stated emphatically: 'You learn more in Ballymaloe than just cooking... It will give you the understanding that food is a living thing. It will give you the understanding that people work hard to produce food and that to treat it with disrespect is a sacrilege.'

A strong tradition of training and advocacy prevails at Ballymaloe Cookery School. Darina Allen has been an activist in relation to specific issues of food justice, such as the campaign for raw milk, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the loss of 'forgotten skills', and food education in schools. Consequently, Ballymaloe Cookery School can be considered an Alternative Food Network (AFN) and supportive of other AFNs. AFNs are generally recognised as activities which set out to challenge the practices of the prevailing industrial food system (Tregear 2011). Alternative food networks as defined by Valeria *et al.* (2013, p. 1) are: '... structures that reconfigure the systems of production, distribution and consumption of food.'

Sage (2012) considers the separation between food producers and consumers at the other end of the supply chain a product of this system. Increasingly, AFNs such as Slow Food and the organic food movement have gained traction internationally, in response to changes in how food is produced and perceived. Slow Food was founded in Italy in 1986. The ethos at the cookery school is aligned to the focus of Slow Food on food that is: 'Good, clean and fair' (Slow Food International 2016).

In today's landscape of industrialised agriculture, Ballymaloe Cookery School acts as a practical example of what can be done to challenge dominant practices in the food industry and to produce and prepare food by alternative means. Alice Waters in her foreword to the *30 Years at Ballymaloe* book states: 'Ballymaloe's great and powerful message is not just about bringing back an appreciation of food and taste, but an understanding of the culture of food, and of Ireland: a culture of stewardship of the land, tradition, hospitality, and, above all, beauty.' (Allen 2013, p. 6).

Farmers' markets are another example of an alternative food network. Myrtle and Darina Allen were instrumental

in establishing the recent farmers' markets movement in Ireland. Twelve of the twenty study participants raised the subject of farmers' markets when interviewed. One study participant, a supplier, long associated with the school, emphasised the role that Darina Allen played in the early days of the Midleton farmers' market established in 2000 in Midleton, approximately 20kms from Ballymaloe: 'She was THE organiser of that market.'

Study respondents consider farmers' markets central to promoting locally produced food. Farmers' markets are ubiquitous across Ireland with over 150 in operation at present (Bord Bia 2015). Rooted in the ethos of Ballymaloe, small and artisan food producers have been championed for decades. At the school high quality produce is sought as locally as is possible. When interviewed, Darina Allen said: 'we buy from about 150 small suppliers and we buy in local shops, such as The Village Greengrocer and Ballycotton Seafood. That money then goes into the local area.'

Both Myrtle and Darina Allen are champions in promoting Irish and local produce, and thus, can be categorised as revolutionaries in the Irish food sector. Another study participant who works in the food industry highlights:

There's a whole network then, on top of their suppliers. I mean half of the success of our markets is because we had Myrtle originally when Ballymaloe was starting to look for good ingredients, followed then by the next generation at Ballymaloe House, with Darina at the cookery school.

The quotation above posits that a network of local producers was created to supply Ballymaloe enterprises. Their produce has become highly regarded and sought after. The presence and success of such producers in one area, or region, reinforces that of others. Cork Chamber of Commerce understands the value of such a business cluster concept and consider 'Telling the Story of Cork', as central to capitalising on opportunities in the sector (2014). As part of their vision, this would take the form of a co-ordinated regional marketing strategy, identifying Cork as a food hub. Responses from study participants suggest that such a food hub already exists in East Cork, and that Ballymaloe Cookery School forms its nucleus. Study participants articulated a belief that an Irish food narrative exists, on account of the work of Darina Allen at Ballymaloe Cookery School. This is illustrated in the following quotations: 'I don't think Ireland would have the food story if it weren't for her.' 'You could say Darina invented food, Darina invented Irish food. She put it on the map.'

For study participants, Ballymaloe Cookery School has raised the profile of Irish food, in Ireland and abroad. Darina Allen has used her position to advance the priorities of small food producers. She is well placed to speak on behalf of small producers as she is engaged in agriculture and horticultural production herself. The

following quotation from a study participant, who supplies Ballymaloe Cookery School, reinforces the view that Darina Allen is a successful advocate for Irish food producers: 'I know that Darina has been very vocal and outspoken... She does an awful lot of behind-the-scenes work and banging on doors on behalf of small farmers and small producers.'

In keeping with its ethos, a level of political engagement is employed at the school. All engagement with food is inherently political, as the adage goes: *eating is a political act*. Michael Pollan (2006) is largely credited with this extension of Wendell Berry's famous line: *eating is inescapably an agricultural act* (1990, p. 149). This phrase asserts that every person takes a stance, makes a choice, in the activity of eating. The phrase acknowledges the direct and indirect processes that are involved in putting food on any table. For Barber (2014), the concept of chef as activist is relatively new. Though Ballymaloe Cookery School was not viewed as outwardly political by many study respondents, a nuanced reading of the primary data revealed that numerous activities at the cookery school, as referred to by study participants, engage with issues of food justice, advocacy and activism. Darina Allen has been progressive in seizing the opportunity to reach out to a broad audience and is recognised as influential. Through her writing, public appearances, and advocacy, Darina Allen reaches an audience beyond the gates of the school. Correspondingly, Jorgensen (2006) considers multiple affiliations a feature of contemporary social movements. Duram and Cawley (2012) acknowledge a need for further research on the role of chefs in the use of local foods and support for producers. Ballymaloe Cookery School offers an alternative in culinary education and creates a space for the critical exploration of alternatives to dominant structures in the food industry. Thirteen respondents made reference to actions at Ballymaloe Cookery School that engage with the politics of food. One example is the TTIP, the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, an EU and US bilateral trade agreement for which negotiations are ongoing, behind closed doors. A former employee at Ballymaloe Cookery School evidences actions taken by Darina Allen with respect to food justice issues:

She is fighting against the TTIP. She is fighting against the GM... She does a lot in the background and people listen when she speaks... It is very important to have somebody like her to lead the fight... She walks the walk basically. And that is very important.

With reference to policies that effect artisan and speciality food producers, one supplier to the school praised Darina Allen for her role in calling for the maintenance of high standards that benefit the producers, as well as the quality of the food they produce: 'Darina Allen is one of the few people that will stand up and say this is ridiculous.'

On a separate issue, speaking at the Artisan Food Symposium at University College Cork (2015), Darina Allen asserted: 'We need to reconnect children with how their food is produced.'

Lang & Baker (1993) draw attention to the lack of opportunities for children to learn cooking skills from parents and guardians who rely largely on pre-prepared foods. Throughout the interview process respondents continuously acknowledged a perceived decline in cooking skills, expressing concern about the transfer of such practical knowledge, as depicted by the following quotation: 'It's a huge loss if skills are lost. The knowledge that our senior citizens have, it needs to be passed on...They could be lost.'

Discussing what they consider the impact of Ballymaloe Cookery School, one of the recurring impacts cited by respondents was the educational outreach that is conducted at the cookery school. This outreach is aside from the range of courses offered to paying students. Nine primary schools participate in The East Cork Slow Food Educational 'Grow and Cook' Project and others have expressed interest. Darina Allen established the East Cork Slow Food Convivium at Ballymaloe Cookery School in 1999, following the initial launch of Slow Food Ireland by Giana Ferguson of Gubbeen Cheese in 1998. Slow Food events at Ballymaloe Cookery School simultaneously attract people to the school, promote the values of the Slow Food movement, and raise funds for the education project. Despite the fact that the project is small in scale, participants in this study expressed a belief that the project was promoting transformation in children's food education. Reports from the project in 2015 found that in one primary school, thirty five parents established a vegetable garden at home and twenty parents began rearing hens for the first time. Growing food can no longer be considered 'common knowledge' in industrialised societies. The first recipe taught to students on the twelve week certificate course is how to make compost, an unusual practice in culinary education. When interviewed, Darina Allen stated: 'We use the school as an indoor classroom and the farm and gardens like an outdoor classroom.'

A recent study makes known direct and indirect benefits to learning in natural environments (Dillon 2013). One employee argues that once a person has practiced food growing themselves, they will more readily recognise the true value of food: 'Maybe when you do buy it or pick it you might appreciate it that little bit more or not throw away half of it because it takes twelve weeks for the little thing to grow.'

The cookery school demonstrates that food can be grown organically, sourced locally and seasonally, and prepared simply to provide tasty food that is nourishing. Holden (2014) describes both the cookery school and related enterprises as: 'a beacon of inspiration, a spreader of best practice and knowledge, and a place of pilgrimage'. Its ethos is more than ideological. At Ballymaloe, it is put into practice. Today, over forty private cookery schools are in operation in Ireland (Allen 2013). A significant impact of

Ballymaloe Cookery School is the number of enterprises and organisations that have been established by past students, including those who have gone on to set up their own cookery schools. One past student makes reference to past students who have carved out careers in food, stating: 'A lot of good people have come from that school.'

The diverse and entrepreneurial career paths of many of its growing body of past students and their success reinforce the brand and reputation of the school. Ballymaloe Cookery School has garnered international renown and attracts students and visitors from many countries. Six study participants made direct reference to its international appeal. The primary research also evidences that tourism in the East Cork region is boosted by the presence and profile of Ballymaloe Cookery School. When asked about the local impact of the cookery school, four respondents used the phrase: 'Putting East Cork on the map'.

While hospitality has long been synonymous with Irish culture, Ireland has not historically been known for its food. Ballymaloe Cookery School has been integral to a shift in this regard. Many of those who attend the school do so in order to attain culinary skill for professional development and consider the twelve week course at Ballymaloe an alternative to a course elsewhere. The school also draws students who pursue courses purely for pleasure, invoking the concept of 'recreational cookery school' (Kramer 2007). Sustaining its ethos and viability for over thirty three years, the school has slowly extended but remains small. Its consistency is voiced by a respondent based at the cookery school:

We don't teach people how to cook whatever's cool this year. We teach people how to cook. The fundamentals of how to cook are still the fundamentals. Some things will change but the foundations of it won't change.

This quotation indicates that the core principles at the school dictate its operations, above industry trends or consumer demand. Simultaneously, a culture of innovation is maintained, and accordingly, it has stayed competitive in an increasingly crowded market. Innovation at Ballymaloe Cookery School is apparent in the variety of sources of ideas for classes, events, and collaboration, as the following employee at the school illustrates: 'They're coming up with new ideas all the time. There's something new every month even with the seasons now, see the difference in the colour of the trees and everything. Every season is different.'

The emphasis on seasonality, central to the ethos at the school, ensures a level of dynamism in the courses on offer. Another source of new ideas is guest chefs who come to the cookery school for short periods of collaboration. The now yearly Ballymaloe Literary Festival of Food and Wine, frequently dubbed *LitFest*, first held in 2013, exemplifies innovation at Ballymaloe. Six study participants made reference to the festival. This event is organised and coordinated across several Ballymaloe enterprises. It is the

only festival of its kind in Ireland and draws speakers and attendees from across the globe.

In summary, this paper set out to establish how Ballymaloe Cookery School has revolutionised food in Ireland over time. The findings point to the enormity of the widespread impact Ballymaloe Cookery School continues to make, regionally, nationally and internationally. The empirical research explores the legacy of appreciation for high quality food first developed by Myrtle Allen at Ballymaloe House, characterised by its support for local artisan producers and augmented by the location of the Ballymaloe enterprises. Adopting this ethos, in addition to its distinct provision of culinary learning, Ballymaloe Cookery School has carved a *niche* offering in the context of culinary education worldwide. The findings further reveal that the school facilitates a network of former students and supports a thriving network of small-scale food producers that have been championed by Ballymaloe for decades. In this way, the school forms a locus of good food in Ireland. This is significant both, because the former reputation of Irish food was poor, and, because Ireland is dependent on its agri-food sector. Though the values underpinning Ballymaloe Cookery School and the fundamentals of cooking taught there remain the same, the school has undergone change, and innovation has been critical to its success. What has become apparent, through undertaking this research, is that Ballymaloe Cookery School has, and continues to be, integral to Ireland's changing foodscape. Myrtle and Darina Allen can be considered leaders in its revolution of Irish food.

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